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Defending and De-fencing: Approaches for Understanding the Social Functions of Public Monuments and Memorials

Melanie L. Buffington
Virginia Commonwealth University
mbuffington@vcu.edu

Erin E. Waldner
Virginia Commonwealth University
waldneree@vcu.edu

Abstract

This article explores two possible meanings of de(fence) as related to historical monuments and memorials. By interpreting this term as both defense (defending and idealizing the past) and de-fence (taking down fences and opening narratives about the past), we develop ways to understand potential social functions of monuments. Through the specific examples of the Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia and *Shoes on the Danube Bank* in Budapest, Hungary, we describe how the ideas of defense and de-fence function. Further, this article also touches upon temporary interventions to monuments including graffiti and yarn bombing.

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Melanie: I was surprised and excited to see that someone spray-painted “no hero” on the base of the Lee Monument. Knowing that it was not likely to last long, I raced home to grab my camera so I could record the graffiti intervention (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. Lee Monument with graffiti.

On the same day, a local yarn bombing artist installed a piece along the same street that altered a cannon (See Figure 2).



Figure 2. Yarn bombing of a cannon on Monument Avenue by the artist Knitorious M.E.G.

These interventions on works of art functioned to subvert the monuments' sacrosanct commemoration of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee and the firepower of the Confederacy. By employing contemporary art practices including juxtaposition and recontextualization (Gude, 2004), these artistic interventions provided a contrast to the commemorative artworks' original positions and functions.

Introduction

In this article, we analyze similarities and differences of how monuments and memorials reflect and shape attitudes toward history and commemoration. We consider ways that monuments and memorials affect people and explore the stated and unstated social purposes of monuments. We are especially interested in instances in which monuments and memorials function socially to maintain or remove barriers.

Through analyzing public artworks loosely described as monuments and memorials, we develop a conceptual framework for potential ways to understand them. We examine the social function of monuments through studying historical monuments in Richmond, Virginia, temporary alterations to these monuments, and a contemporary memorial in Budapest, Hungary.

Monuments and Memorials

Many times the words *monument* and *memorial* are used interchangeably. But to some these words connote different shades of meaning, with monument connoting celebration and triumph versus memorial connoting solemn remembrance and tragedy (Young, 1993). We use the word *monument*¹ to describe a significant permanent public sculpture created to commemorate and glorify an event, a person, or even a concept. We use the word *memorial* in reference to public art objects that are not so much intended to glorify as to cause us to remember or recall something, often related to the loss of life.² In making this distinction, we looked to Arthur Danto's (1985) writing on the topic: "Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments, we honor ourselves" (p. 152). Though not all scholars agree, Danto says that the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial functions as a memorial through its explicit remembrance of the dead.³ Conversely, we view Mount Rushmore as a monument, a monumentally scaled tribute to the legacies of four American presidents. A work like Claus Oldenburg's *Clothespin* sculpture in Philadelphia is a large public sculpture, but neither a monument nor memorial because it does not commemorate a significant event or person.

Another scholar, James E. Young (1993), disagrees with Danto's distinction. He notes that "A statue can be a monument to heroism and a memorial to tragic loss, an obelisk can memorialize a nation's birth and monumentalize leaders fallen before their prime" (p. 3). In other words, Young believes that many physical sculptures and objects of remembrance perform both functions as outlined by Danto. Therefore, Young chooses not to separate a memorial from a monument, but rather to think of a monument as a subset of the category of memorials where monument refers to the specific physical object, such as a statue, and memorial is an umbrella category including a site, a day, or an activity among others (Young).

¹ We have found that the words *monument* and *memorial* are sometimes used interchangeably. For a longer discussion on the terminology, please refer to Young (2006) and Danto (1985).

² For the purposes of this article, we focus on public monuments and memorials dedicated to well-known people or events.

³ As is the case with many art works, we recognize that the social function of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial as well as its meaning may be disputed by various scholars.

Sanctioned monuments built by municipalities or civic groups, unlike other public sculptures, ask the audience to remember something deemed significant from the past, are often meant to be permanent, and are frequently designed to appeal to a wide audience. There can be monuments to commemorate specific events that happened on one day or events that spanned years, such as the Civil War. There are monuments commemorating famous individuals including Joe Louis in Detroit, Michigan or a group, like the nurses of the Vietnam War in Washington, DC. There are also monuments that commemorate abstract concepts, like peace, such as the Children's Peace Memorial in Hiroshima, Japan. Occasionally, an object takes on meaning to become a monument over time, as was the case with the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Though this bell was created in 1751 to honor the 50th anniversary of the original constitution of Pennsylvania, it did not have iconic status until it became the symbol of the Abolition movement. Previously known as the "State House Bell," it was renamed the "Liberty Bell" by an anti-slavery publication. An image of the bell first appeared in Abolitionist literature in 1837; soon the bell became the symbol of the Abolition movement and eventually a monument to the important concept of liberty for all people (The Liberty Bell, n.d.).

Monuments Defend

Some monuments are built to transmit or defend values. The erectors of permanent monuments usually intend their monument to impress, or even instruct, people of that time as well as people of the future. Monuments ascribe authority to the values they represent. As permanent features of the landscape, monuments also tend to make values they assert seem natural—something one might not think to question (Loewen, 1999). Monuments function to defend the values of the time they were erected against current counter-narratives or changes in thought that might threaten these values in the future.

Defense: The Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia

Erin: Today I made a visit to the Lee Monument. It is a site I have passed both walking and driving innumerable times during my daily travels through the city, but today I was here intentionally to stop and take a fresh look. I circled the monument on foot, nervous to cross the street onto the grassy plot surrounding it. Finally I crossed and slowly walked around the base. I noticed the smooth hard granite, the exquisite craftsmanship, and the material language of power and grandeur. I looked upward at Lee's bronze likeness from below, a vantage point that gives a sense of the statue's heroic scale. Across the street, a man was standing to have his picture taken with the monument in the background. I wanted to sit and take notes, but I felt hesitant to make a spectacle of myself. Would people think I was visiting my hero, paying homage to a revered figure, or scoping the scene and taking measurements to plan an act of guerilla art intervention?



Figure 3. The Lee Monument.

Context and History

Erected in 1890, the Lee Monument stands proudly on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia in the middle of a large park-like traffic circle. It was sculpted by the French artist Marius-Jean-Antonin Mercié and was exhibited briefly in Paris before being shipped to Virginia. The Lee Monument Association formed to sponsor the funding of the monument; their choice of a French sculptor reflects a desire to imbue the Southern position with class and refinement (Driggs, Wilson, & Winthrop, 2001).

The context for this monument today is within the heart of a mostly affluent neighborhood of large Neo-Victorian houses and student apartments called the Fan. Some streets in the Fan, including Monument Avenue, are paved with attractive paving blocks, intended to conjure the historic cobblestone that once surfaced the road. The Lee monument was originally erected on an empty tract of land west of the city of Richmond. The city later expanded to envelop the land on which the monument stands. This development included the grand boulevard design of Monument Avenue as well as historical monuments to other Confederate icons, including J.E.B. Stuart, Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson, and Matthew Maury, and much later, one contemporary monument to the humanitarian and tennis star, Arthur Ashe (Driggs, Wilson, & Winthrop, 2001). Also along this road is the cannon in Figure 2, as well as other historical markers, many related to the Confederate perspective on the Civil War.

The monument to Robert E. Lee was dedicated in 1890, 25 years after the end of the Civil War during an era in the South known as the Lost Cause Era (Leib, 2006). For many Southerners, Robert E. Lee was an icon of Southern gentility (Savage, 1997). Statues of Lee,

like the one in Richmond, were intended to defend Lee's memory as a great Southern hero and reframe the history of slavery and the Civil War to make the South look more favorable. According to a tour guide at the Museum of the Confederacy, supporters of the Lost Cause movement, including former president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, travelled throughout the South, delivering speeches supporting the movement's ideals. Its mythology included the ideal of a Southern Gentleman and nostalgia for the antebellum South (Leib, 2006; Savage, 1997). Additionally, the Lost Cause included the belief that the South lost because soldiers from the North did not behave like gentlemen; that the Civil War was not actually about slavery, but states' rights; and that slaves were relatively content working on plantations where their needs were met (Gallagher, 1995; McPherson, 2007; Nolan, 2000).

How is the Lee monument "defense"?

The Lee monument was intended to promote the specific historical narrative of the Lost Cause and increase the significance of Robert E. Lee. It uses conventions of hieratic scale, such as heroic size and lasting materials (Loewen, 1999) to support a narrative that praises the heroic nature of Lee and his wartime actions. Because the Lee monument resists a variety of interpretations, but continues to be a significant visual presence in Richmond, the monument is controversial. To many citizens, it is an offensive symbol of inequality because it functions as an affirmation of the Southern attempt to secede from the United States and to maintain the institution of slavery. To others, it is considered a treasured object of Southern heritage (Green, 2012). As a piece of political art, it functions similarly to propaganda, instructing viewers to remember history in a certain way. In this way, the statue takes a defensive position—defending the values of the defeated Confederate States, ensuring an ongoing victory of values, even in the face of military defeat.

Another Approach to Monuments

Though the confederate monuments in Richmond stand defensively, some activist artists nevertheless approach the sculptures with an action-oriented mindset through temporary interventions. Although authorities remove most actions within 24 hours, we see these temporary artistic interventions as an important way to demonstrate that the meaning of seemingly static monuments changes over time. While considering reasons that artists choose to intervene with traditional monuments, we conducted an email interview with Knitorious M.E.G. and asked her some questions about how and why she chose to place a yarn bomb on Monument Avenue. She stated:

I usually stay away from statues or monuments and look for more everyday and neglected subjects. But I was in the mood for a very Richmond target and since Lee and the rest of the boys are too high to reach, I knew picking one of the cannons would be doable. I've driven down Monument loads of times over the years I've lived in this town and I know how proud lots of Richmonders are of Monument Ave and also, oppositely, how it is offensive to others. I felt the cannon was an unexpected and a bit of a paradox location to brighten up with yarn. Also, I like the idea of 'bombing' something that, in fact, bombed things. (personal communication, August 6, 2011).

Though temporary, her work was intentionally designed to disrupt the dominant narrative of Monument Avenue. She stated that her goal was the same with this work as with her other yarn bombs: "to surprise people and make them smile" (personal communication,

August 6, 2011). This yarn bomb lasted less than 24 hours, but it certainly changed the narrative of the street and added another point of view to those already well represented there. Her intervention illustrates Young's (2006) observation that people tend to bring their understandings of the world in their own time to their interpretation of the events and story represented by a historical monument. This interaction of messages from different time periods (the present, the time the monument was built, and the time the monument refers to) can affect how people's views perceive the significance of the historical monument to the contemporary community where it stands. Thus, static memorials of the past continue to evolve through new understandings of the present. In the case of Knitorious M.E.G., her artistic intervention added additional layers to various interpretations of the narrative of this cannon and Monument Avenue.



Figure 4. Knitorious M.E.G.'s 'signature' on the yarn bomb she installed on the cannon on Monument Avenue.

Though we have not been able to locate the person who sprayed "no hero" on the base of the Lee Monument, this anonymous action, which the city removed within 24 hours, functioned to intervene with the monuments' sacrosanct message. The graffiti on Lee's monument effectively changed the monument's meaning for a day. Additionally it affected the meaning of the monument in the memories of Richmonders who saw or heard about this intervention. At any given time, the monument may look the same as in the past, but viewers may retain traces of layerings of counter-narratives and counter-interpretations in their memories and thoughts. Through an unsanctioned action, the graffiti artist asked viewers to reevaluate who is a hero. Actions such as this may not remove metaphorical fences immediately, but each intervention is an illicit climb over the fence that may gradually call the fence's authority into question.

De-fence.

In contrast to the Lee Monument that functions to control and limit interpretations, we think of de-fence as removing fences, taking away boundaries, and opening up monuments (and history) to multiple interpretations. For instance, *Shoes on the Danube Bank* (see Figures 5 and 6) in Budapest, Hungary and the Civil Rights memorial in Montgomery, Alabama are two contemporary memorials that work to de-fence. Although the time period a monument or memorial was erected does not inherently correspond to whether it functions to 'defend' or 'de-fence,' we have noticed that those which function to de-fence often utilize the language of contemporary art in their scale, materials, promotion of interaction, and openness to a variety of interpretations.

De-fence: *Shoes on the Danube Bank* in Budapest, Hungary

Melanie: It was quiet along the river and during my visit, only one other person stopped to look at the sculpture. The life size bronze shoes were clearly women's, men's, and children's styles and some were tilted to the side as if the wearers had just slipped out their feet.



Figure 5. *Shoes on the Danube Bank* sculpture.



Figure 6. Close-up shot of *Shoes on the Danube Bank*.

The humanity and uniqueness of each individual shoe was a meaningful element that reinforced the loss of life commemorated by this work. The worn surfaces, the laces that were askew, and the varying sizes and styles of the shoes all added elements of humanity to the sculpture. I read these differences as representative of the individual personalities of the people who were killed. I wondered if each pair of shoes stood for an actual person or if the shoes were more generally meant to represent all the people who died along the river.

Shoes on the Danube Bank

Shoes on the Danube Bank is a public memorial created in remembrance of Jewish residents of Budapest, Hungary who died at the hands of the Arrow Cross, Hungarian fascists during the Holocaust (Nahshon, 2008). It was created by Gyula Pauer, a conceptual artist and set designer, and Can Togay, a film director, actor, and poet. The idea for the memorial originated in response to the opening of The House of Terror in Budapest in 2002, a museum concerning “fascist and communist regimes of 20th century Hungary.” The exhibits in this museum were criticized by some for their “overemphasis on Hungary’s victimhood and minimization of the role played by Hungarians” (p. 31). Togay believed that a memorial remembering the killing of Jews by Hungarians on the banks of the Danube would educate the public about an aspect of Hungarian history that was being omitted in the popular history presented at the House of Terror Museum (Nahshon, 2008). Essentially, the artists wanted to expand the historical narrative of Hungary’s involvement in WWII presented by the House of Terror Museum with this sculpture that directly addresses the complicity of some Hungarians with the killing of Jews. At a representational level, the artists chose to use shoes because the people who were shot into the river were required to remove their shoes first. Shoes were valuable at the time, and the Arrow Cross militiamen wanted these valuable items. It was considered efficient to shoot people into the river to save the time that it would have taken to dig graves.

Historical Context

Though Hungarian Jews were not treated as equals, they became subject to institutionalized discrimination in the form of unfair laws and regulations starting in 1938. Unlike the situation Jews faced in many other European countries, the lives of Hungarian Jews were somewhat protected from the Nazi regime because Hungary was not invaded by the Nazis until relatively late in WWII (Rozett & Spector, 2000). When the Nazis invaded on March 19, 1944, there were approximately 200,000 Jews living in Budapest, and after the Nazis came their lives changed dramatically. Though the Nazis invaded, Hungary’s leader, Miklos Horthy, worked with the Germans and was able to remain in power. Across Hungary, thousands of Jews were deported to concentration camps, but these deportations were temporarily ended by Horthy on July 7, 1944 due in part to pressure from Western governments (Rozett & Spector, 2000). However, in October of 1944, the Germans overthrew Horthy’s government; gave power to the Arrow Cross party, a group of Hungarian fascists (Karsai, 1998); and life for Hungarian Jews rapidly deteriorated. Approximately 600 Jews from Budapest were lined up, shot, and their bodies fell into the Danube in October of 1944 (Bauer, 1980). On November 1, 1944, forced marches began to send Jews to Germany as military laborers with 25,000 Hungarian Jews leaving on this day with Arrow Cross troops as their ‘escorts.’ Though Germany wanted 50,000 Jews, the Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi only sent 25,000 because he needed them for digging trenches in Hungary (Karsai, 1998) due to the threat of the Soviets. Later the shooting of Jews increased to include 20,000 shot into the Danube River by Hungarian Arrow Cross militiamen from December 1944 to January 1945 (Rozett & Spector, 2000). Also at this time, Jews in Budapest who had paperwork known as protective passes and passports were directed to live in a series of designated houses. However, these arrangements made it easier for the Arrow Cross to find them and kill them (Karsai, 1998). Though the Germans planned to empty the Budapest ghettos, the Soviets came first and conquered both sides of the Danube by the end of February, 1945. Of the 200,000 Jews in Budapest in March of 1944, only 120,000 survived (Rozett & Spector, 2000).

Shoes on the Danube Bank as an Act of De-fence

This artwork is monumental in different ways from many commemorative public sculptures. Because it is made of 60 pairs of human-sized shoes, it impacts the viewer in terms of the number of lives lost and the relatable human scale of each individual element. Its monumentality comes less from its physical size and more from its visual power as a work of art. Like Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, where each name signifies a person and the sheer number of listed names is profound, the quantity of shoes has a similar effect. Further, both pieces function as adaptable spaces (Savage, 2006) that allow for many types of human interaction. The shoes symbolize the individuals lost by being shot into the river, the approximately 80,000 Jews of Budapest who were killed during the Nazi occupation and Arrow Cross rule (Rozett & Spector, 2000), and also refer to the Holocaust itself.

Shoes on the Danube Bank is a permanent public memorial, but rather than taking precedent from the tradition of hieratic scale in public commemorative art, it takes a cue from contemporary installation. Nahshon (2008) writes that "the aim of the artists was 'to create an object that would raise questions *in* and present questions *to* the observer,' be that a native or tourist who strolls down the popular Danube bank" (p. 31). This relates to Desai's (2010) point that contemporary artists seek to challenge "the idea of 'objective' representations of history" (p. 49); likewise, this piece does not seek to tell one finite linear story.

Shoes on the Danube Bank functions to invite dialogue, a hallmark characteristic of postmodern art. By presenting a historical event that is underrepresented in popular history, *Shoes on the Danube Bank* functions as a counter-monument (Young, 1999), a representation different from the collective memory of many Hungarians. *Shoes on the Danube Bank* takes the stance of de-fence to offer an additional perspective on Hungary's history concerning fascism and the Holocaust. It also works to remove a symbolic fence that separates concepts of victimhood from guilt, and the idea of one "true" history from multiple experiences and individual stories. Furthermore, by allowing the viewer to interpret the artwork more freely, the sculpture works against the fence separating the knowledge and understanding of the artist from the knowledge and understanding of the viewer. By suggesting a more open-ended interpretation, and by being placed on a popular walkway along the Danube River, the sculpture also breaks down fences by inviting dialogue among viewers, including local visitors and tourists.

Comparing and Contrasting Works that Defend and De-fence

As we considered the Lee Monument and *Shoes on the Danube Bank*, we were continually struck by how different their functions seem to be, but how similar they are in other ways. Both the sculptures of Lee and *Shoes on the Danube Bank* use lasting materials (bronze and iron, respectively), are representations of the past, and employ a realistic style of art (Barrett, 2008). However, their placement, the stories they tell, and how they tell these stories give them vastly different social functions.

The Lee Monument and *Shoes on the Danube Bank* function differently both artistically and socially. Whereas the Lee Monument exists on a grand scale and depicts an idealized 'truth' designed to convey a single version of history to make the South proud, *Shoes on the Danube Bank* is quite different. Created on a human scale with pieces that look worn and tired, *Shoes on the Danube Bank* presents an introspective depiction of a significant and horrific

event from Hungary's past. The Lee Monument presents a fixed interpretation of one man, whereas *Shoes on the Danube Bank* is open to myriad interpretations and represents many people. Though both recall history, they have dramatically different social functions in this way.

Implications and Conclusion

Monuments and memorials are features of the built environment that inform our understanding of history and place. As teachers, artists, and citizens, it is important to be aware of the messages and subsequent social functions encoded in our built environment. If a monument takes a defensive stance, working to reinforce the values of the sponsors of a monument in the time it was erected, we must ask ourselves if the monument continues to represent values still worth defending. Likewise, monuments and actions that function to de-fence can bring to light issues and responsibilities that deserve careful consideration. Art education can be a pathway toward a more thoughtful understanding of social functions of the built environment. By understanding these functions of defense or de-fence in the built environment, citizens may be empowered to react to these functions with greater intentionality.

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